

Government Agenda Setting in Italian Coalitions

Testing the “partisan hypothesis” using Italian investiture speeches 1979–2014*

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ABSTRACT

Despite variations in institutional and political settings, comparative political research is consistent in pointing to executives as the main drivers of national agendas in parliamentary systems. After presenting a new dataset coding the policy content of investiture speeches of appointed Italian Prime Ministers between 1979 and 2014, this article offers a new strategy to test the “partisan hypothesis”, i.e., the relationship between ideology and the issue composition of executives’ policy agendas. By comparing each pair of Italian governments’ programmatic speeches through multivariate analyses, we show that the ideological distance of governments is a good predictor for agenda divergence in a multiparty–coalition political system.

KEY WORDS ■ Agenda-setting ■ Public policy ■ Prime minister investiture speeches ■ Italy

* All authors contributed to every section of the article, but Enrico Borghetto is especially responsible for sections 4 and 5, Francesco Visconti for section 2 and Marco Michieli for section 3. The work of Enrico Borghetto was supported by the FCT Research Grant

1

Introduction

The formation of policy agendas, defined as “the list of subjects or problems to which society pays serious attention at any given time” (Kingdon 1984, 3), is one of the most consequential states of the policy process. Without paying attention to a problem, there can be no policy change or, using Schattschneider’s words, “the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power” (1960, 68). Political elites are faced with an abundance of information regarding the state of the world, and these “problems” must compete for the limited space on the political agenda. This information needs to be processed and prioritized before any action can take place. Due to awareness of the critical importance of agenda-setting dynamics, a rich tradition of studies has provided accounts for why certain issues are prioritized and discussed on the political agenda, whereas others are neglected (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Cobb and Elder 1983; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Kingdon 1984). These works have inspired a relatively recent wave of agenda-setting studies sharing a similar methodological approach, the Comparative Agendas Project [CAP; www.comparativeagendas.net] (Borghetto and Carammia 2010; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave 2014).

While the flow of attention of attention can be inspected along the whole policy process and through the eyes of different political actors, the preponderance of executives in national policy-making makes the study of cabinet agendas an ideal starting point. Despite variations in institutional and political settings, comparative political research is consistent in pointing to executives as the primary drivers of national agendas in parliamentary systems (Rasch and Tsebelis 2013).¹ Several works

¹ Executive dominance has been enhanced over the years by two parallel processes. On the one side, the expansion of state functions and the parallel increase of bureaucratic apparatuses has expanded the need for greater coordination and governance in an increasingly broad range of policy areas (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). On the other hand, the growing shift of decision-making powers to regional and international organizations has enhanced the role of executive representatives who have a seat in these institutions, vis-à-vis parliamentary institutions, which are

have investigated the agendas of executives through the prism of agenda-setting studies (Breeman et al. 2009; Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011a; Jennings and John 2010; Mortensen et al. 2011). Most of them found little evidence for the supposition that government turnover and changes in ideology do account for major alterations in executive programmatic profiles. Rather, cabinet agendas tend to exhibit a remarkable degree of stability, punctuated only occasionally by sudden shifts of attention, mostly associated with responses to pressing public problems (e.g., Mortensen et al. 2011). These findings take issue with a large body of literature which, on the contrary, has stressed the importance of governments' ideological positions on policy priorities (for a review, see Imbeau et al. 2001). Parties will try to attach their name to a specific core of policy priorities and positions to appeal to their partisan constituencies and, when entering a government coalition, they will try to have them incorporated in executive programmatic declarations. As a result, the executive agendas of left-leaning coalitions should differ from those of right-leaning coalitions. Ultimately, it is what parties do in office that helps them to consolidate their ownership of selected issues.

Although these studies have done much to further our understanding of how executives allocate attention, evidence on the impact of partisanship remains mixed. This article aims to contribute to the debate by providing a new test of the two competing hypotheses on the relationship between party ideology and executive agendas presented above (in line with Baumgartner et al. 2009b, we refer to them as the *partisan differentiation* and the *partisan neutrality* hypotheses). Specifically, for each pair of cabinets in our dataset, we test the association between their ideological distance and divergences in the content of their agendas. We interpret a positive and statistically significant association as evidence that partisan ideology does matter for agenda content.

We conduct our analysis using multivariate regression analysis and control for a series of government-specific and speech-specific attributes. The study covers 27 Italian governments, starting in 1979 at the inauguration of the eighth legislature, and ending in 2014 with Renzi's speech during the

still more active on the national dimension (Moravcsik 1994).

17th parliamentary term. Data on party ideology and executive agendas are derived from the content coding of investiture debates preceding the vote of confidence. This is indisputably one of the constitutive moments in the life of an Italian cabinet. It is the occasion at which a cabinet's policy goals and legislative agenda for the next five years are presented or, in the case of government turnover, for the remainder of the legislative term. As a result, we argue that it represents a suitable setting for studying the relationship between party ideology and executive agenda in Italy. Data on party ideological positions were retrieved from the Italian Legislative Speech Dataset (Curini 2011, Curini and Martelli 2009). This data set has the advantage of providing estimates of party positions that vary not only across legislatures, but also within each one of them. Data on the policy content of executive agendas were obtained by coding the policy content of programmatic speeches delivered by the appointed Italian Prime Ministers (PM) before receiving the vote of confidence. Each sentence or quasi-sentence of a speech was coded into one of the 239 issue areas, before being aggregated into one of the 21 major areas composing the Italian CAP codebook. The main asset of this topic coding lies in its level of granularity. Executive agendas can be relatively complex and heterogeneous policy documents, so we need finer lenses to track their evolution through time.

The article begins by framing the hypotheses mentioned above in the literature and by describing our research design. Then, we present an overview of Italian executive formation and agenda-setting and its evolution from the First to the Second Republics. Next, we give a descriptive account of our dependent variable, executive agendas. This is followed by a formal test of the two hypotheses. We end with a discussion of the results.

2

Government ideology and executive agendas

The goal of this article is to analyse the relationship between governments' ideological position and the policy content of executive programmatic speeches. Prime Ministers' investment speeches have been extensively used in the literature as a proxy for the policy agenda of a government (see *infra*). As a direct measure of cabinets' policy priorities, they do not pose the dilemma related to the aggregation of coalition partners'

interests. Unlike electoral manifestos, they also have the advantage of measuring the agenda not only for the whole legislature, but for each new executive, allowing for variation within each legislative term. Moreover, compared to other direct measures of policy agenda like executive budget speeches, they impose fewer constraints and are more easily visible to the general public, and “therefore represent a much more likely case for identifying effects of partisan colour and electoral mandate” (Mortensen et al. 2011, 7).

The sizeable research literature on this topic can be organized around two opposing views (e.g., Baumgartner et al. 2009b, John et al. 2014). On one side, the *partisan differentiation* hypothesis states that party identity matters for agenda-setting. There are general attributes of left- and right-wing ideology that influence which issues a party prioritizes and focuses on while in government. Such issues are historically associated with those parties and cannot be downplayed because they are judged necessary by both their advocates and their voters (see Budge 2015 for a detailed literature review). Periodically, parties have to refresh this “ownership” in the mind of the electorate. An excellent opportunity to do so is by showing commitment to these issues while in office. For instance, left-wing governments are expected to spend relatively more on welfare, and right-wing governments on defence (e.g., Soroka and Wlezien 2010). This article is not concerned with the impact of ideology on policy outputs and spending patterns, but on executive priorities. Even so, the relevance of agenda-setting decisions should not be understated, because the first step to getting executives to act on specific issues is to include them in the executive programme. In summary, the *partisan differentiation* hypothesis expects the ideological composition of a government coalition to be associated with the content of the executive programme.

The *partisan neutrality* hypothesis challenges the relevance of partisan influences on executive programmes. Executives are primarily problem-solving institutions in charge of responding to a constantly changing external environment (Jones & Baumgartner 1995). Their agenda must adapt to pressing domestic and international problems facing the whole nation, no matter the composition of their party. Secondly, the PM and ministers are individuals with their own preferences and vision (Baumgartner et al. 2009a). This implies that they may be willing to attach their name to specific policies, even though they

are not an integral part of the core ideology of their party. Finally, executive agendas are inherently stable because of old problems inherited from previous governments (Rose 1990), and because executives can anticipate the need to reach compromises with non-partisan actors such as interest groups and bureaucrats in the course of the mandate and to decide to incorporate some of their priorities in the programme from the very beginning.

Previous works investigating executives' agendas (Baumgartner et al. 2009b; Breeman et al. 2009; Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011a; Jennings and John 2010; John et al. 2014; Jones and Baumgartner 2005; Mortensen et al. 2011) found mixed evidence that changes in the partisan control of governments account for major alterations in executive programmatic profiles. Rather, cabinet agendas tend to exhibit a remarkable degree of stability. They only occasionally witness sudden shifts of attention, mostly in reaction to pressing public problems (e.g., Mortensen et al. 2011). Among the countries investigated – Australia, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States – only the analysis of the UK case lent support to the partisan differentiation hypothesis (Jennings et al. 2011b; John and Jennings 2010; Mortensen et al. 2011). All other studies showed that partisan changes in government do not systematically affect the level of year-to-year stability in government agendas.

These works have significantly contributed to our comparative knowledge of executive agenda dynamics. On the other hand, their strategy of testing partisan influence is mostly based on either measures of year-to-year correlation (Baumgartner et al. 2009b; Breeman et al. 2009), issue stability (Mortensen et al. 2011) or binary variables measuring election years or partisan shifts in government (John and Jennings 2010; Jennings et al. 2011b; Mortensen et al. 2011). First, using a year-to-year measure of stability only allows for a comparison of the sequence of governments. Secondly, a binary variable measuring government turnover fails to capture party shifts on the policy spectrum. In this article, we test the two competing hypotheses, adopting a different strategy for each. For each pair of cabinets, regardless of their temporal sequence, we verify the association between their distance on the left-right dimension and the thematic divergence in their agendas. A positive and

statistically significant association should be taken as evidence of the partisan differentiation hypothesis. A null or negative association lends support to the partisan neutrality hypothesis.

3

Setting executive agendas in Italy

Given their prominence, there is no shortage of works analysing investiture speeches in Italy. Some focused on their rhetoric content (Bolasco 1996; Di Benedetto 2009; Fedel 1998). Others coded the policy content of investiture debates to infer the policy positions of the cabinet and parties in parliament (Curini 2011; Curini and Martelli 2009; Ieraci 2008).² Finally, others parsed investiture speeches searching for specific political commitments (Villone and Zuliani 1996). To date (and to our knowledge), only the latter study has systematically analysed the evolution of government agendas in Italy over time. Villone and colleagues analysed programmatic speeches from the first (1948) to the 11th (1994) legislature by coding each sentence expressing a policy commitment according to one of 21 policy sectors (or 69 sub-sectors, or 137 sub-sub-sectors). They also classified each policy commitment based on its specificity (see Guagnano 1996, 94–106). By computing the number of commitments in the speech addressing each policy area, they found evidence that the cabinet agenda gradually expanded in scope in the first 11 Italian legislatures (1948–1994). As expected, each topic exhibited a specific trend: some either increased or decreased monotonically, while others fluctuated between periods of high and low attention. Overall, their analysis revealed that the logic underlying the evolution of attention is more issue-specific than system-determined. After dividing Italy's pre-1992 history into four intervals (according to the type of governing coalition supporting the cabinet), they show that none of these periods exhibit remarkably distinct patterns in the distribution of

² For instance, Curini and Martelli (2009) and Curini (2011) analysed the content of all investiture speeches going from 1946 to 1994 in order to derive, using an adapted version of the Comparative Manifesto Project, the two most relevant policy dimensions characterizing the Italian political space and the relative position of each party/coalition over time. These data were used, among other things, to shed new light on the analytical narratives of the formation and dissolution of governments for the whole First Republic period.

attention.

More than 20 years have passed since the comprehensive work edited by Villone and Zuliani and, in the meantime, the Italian political system has undergone a profound transformation. As no party has ever managed to command an absolute majority in both chambers, most post-war Italian cabinets have had to rely on formalized coalitions. What has changed in the last decades has been the process of coalition formation. Under the old proportional electoral system, parties did not need to coalesce before elections. Each party ran individual campaigns and, based on its proportional share of votes and coalition potential, it could negotiate its position in government. The pivotal party in the process of government formation was always the Christian Democracy (DC) Party, the relative majority party, since the other major political force, the Communist Party (PC), was systematically deemed to be an unacceptable coalition partner due to its alleged “anti-system” profile. Smaller parties on the centre-left and centre-right had no alternative but to grant or deny their support to DC-led coalitions, largely based on political opportunity. The executive agenda outlined in investiture speeches represented more of a platform for discussion than a pre-agreed list of priorities tying the parliamentary majority to the cabinet. It set out a template for party bargaining, which was already underway during the debate following the PM’s speech, when each party had the chance to publicly stress its policy position on specific agenda items (Russo 2015). It is worth noting that important policy decisions were not usually the outcome of intra-cabinet meetings. Italian ministers answered by and large to their party representatives (to whom they owed their positions), rather than to the PM.³ Talks took place mostly in meetings between party chairs and the PM, the so-called *vertici*. When divisions emerged and could not be overcome, governmental crises were one of the accepted instruments for the renegotiation of the terms of the coalition agreement without calling for new elections. These resulted in a cabinet reshuffle and a new vote of investiture.

Since 1994, the process of government formation and the

³ As aptly described by Hine, the Italian chief executive “is at most a political formula, and his main task is to negotiate agreement on the detailed legislative implementation of that formula between the factions and parties of which it is composed” (1993, p. 200).

standing of the PM inside the government has changed significantly. First, the majoritarian prize in single districts envisaged by the new electoral law has forced parties to merge into coalitions which share a programme and a leader before the elections. Secondly, the simultaneous rise of a new political force in the centre-right (Berlusconi's Forza Italia), and a "normalized" social democratic party on the centre-left, filled the void left by the implosion of the old party system. The dynamics of party competition became essentially bipolar, pitting a centre-right coalition against a centre-left one, so much so that "their [the coalitions] size, composition and performance are the most important factors for explaining electoral outcomes" (Bartolini et al. 2004, p. 2).⁴ The combination of these two factors is said to have shortened the electoral link between voters and executives. On the one hand, Italian heads of state did not have much choice but to appoint the leader of the winning coalition as formateur PM, which indisputably strengthened the PM and made him/her more of a leader and less of a mediator. On the other hand, coalitions competed based on alternative pre-electoral platforms, with the implicit commitment to implement them once in office. A mandate relationship emerged between voters and the executive, at least rhetorically, whereby the implementation of the coalition agenda became more and more important in increasing the prospect of re-election. In other words, in the new system, election results are expected to more directly determine not only who will govern but also the executive agenda (Borghetto et al. 2014; Moury 2013).

4

The evolution of Italian executive agendas, 1979–2014

The analysis that follows relies on a dataset of all of the investiture speeches delivered at the Chamber of Deputies by Italian PMs between 1979 and 2014. Investiture ceremonies of the appointed President of the Council of Ministers date back to the monarchic era, and include a speech addressed to both

⁴ The return to a PR system in 2005 did not fundamentally transform the bipolar structure of the Italian party system due to its strong disproportional traits. It was the appearance of a new strong anti-establishment contestant in the 2013 elections, the Five Star Movement, that ushered Italy into a tripolar system.

chambers of the Parliament before the new cabinet asks for a confidence vote.⁵ Through the decades, investiture speeches have varied in length and tone, largely reflecting the different personalities and rhetorical style of Italian PMs. At the same time, their basic structure has not changed significantly. They can generally be divided into four distinct parts (Capolupo 1996; Russo 1984). First, the speeches start with a ceremonial section, used primarily to evaluate the general political situation and make references to past events. Depending on whether the cabinet is the first of the legislature or whether it is following an early cabinet dissolution, the focus can either be put on the events of the recent electoral campaign or on how the crisis within the majority coalition was solved. The second part is devoted to an overview of perceived societal priorities, most of the time backed up by data or general references to public problems left unaddressed by previous governments. This is the list of issues which, in principle, will work as the political compass for the new executive. Finally, there is a list of specific policy objectives to be attained during the legislative mandate and the intended institutional instruments for their realization. This section not only directs attention to problems, but also to solutions. Speeches usually end with a highly symbolic appeal for collaboration between all the forces of the political hemicycle for the well-being of the country. Topic coding made use of the CAP master codebook, partly adapted to take Italian specificities into account. The coding framework consists of 21 major topics, each divided into a number of minor topics. These sum up to 239 topics in the Italian codebook.⁶ This twofold level of coding specificity represents one of the main assets of these data. It allows for changes to be tracked in policy attention both at a general (how much emphasis was accorded to either foreign policy or labour issues) and at the policy level (two cabinets can allocate the same amount of attention to environmental issues, but have different priorities regarding waste disposal and forest

⁵ The government appointed by the President of the Republic needs a positive vote of confidence from both Houses before entering into force, and a lack of confidence in one Chamber is enough to bring it down (Art. 92–94 of the Italian Constitution). From a formal viewpoint, executives are not accountable for the implementation of the policy programme delineated in the investiture speech.

⁶ The Italian codebook is available at the following url: <https://goo.gl/qvbdUA>.

and species protection policies). The analysis that follows will only be run at the major topic level, although the results at the minor topic level are largely compatible.⁷ The other advantage of this dataset is its comparability with other datasets produced by the Italian CAP team as well as those from other nations (see, for instance, Borghetto and Carammia 2015). With regard to the coding process, we first removed all non-relevant parts of the text, such as titles or interventions by other MPs interrupting the speech. Secondly, we split all speeches into either sentences or quasi-sentences, i.e., parts of a sentence mentioning different minor topics. These are our units of analysis. Thirdly, we coded through a dummy whether each (quasi-) sentence contained policy content or was purely ceremonial/rhetorical (for instance, when it contained accounts of the government formation process). Following Breeman et al. (2009), the units of text containing policy content were further divided into: statements containing general references to a policy problem or goals, e.g., “we will support measures to protect occasional workers”, and statements presenting specific policy actions, e.g., “we will speed up the approval of the minimum wage reform in parliamentary committees”. Subsequently, to each quasi-sentence containing policy content, the coders assigned a major and a minor topic code. Documents were coded by the authors, who worked in pairs but assigned codes independently. As coding reliability was one of the main concerns, the coders discussed each case of disagreement, and all of the authors made the final decision. This process progressively contributed to the improvement of inter-coder reliability, which attained levels of above 0.90 at an advanced stage of the coding process.

During the 35 years covered by the present research, 28 cabinets took office, with the overall cabinet duration varying from 100 (Spadolini II in 1982) to 1412 days (Berlusconi II from 2001 to 2004).⁸ Of these, two were “technocratic” cabinets (Dini in 1995 and Monti in 2011) featuring ministers and junior ministers without political affiliations. The time range of the study allows for a comparison of the speeches delivered during the last four legislatures of the First Republic (1979–1993) and all of the speeches of the six subsequent legislatures (1994–2014). We purposely selected only the tail end of the First Republic,

⁷ These analyses are available upon request.

⁸ The “caretaker” Fanfani VI government (1983) did not win the vote of investiture and was dropped from the analysis.

because our interest lies in the changes brought about by the introduction of bipolarism after 1994.⁹ Comparing legislatures too far back in time risks introducing too much unobserved heterogeneity. We went back to 1979 to cover all of the legislatures in what Calise (2015) labelled “the age of reform” of Italian executives.¹⁰ These years witnessed the adoption of a range of institutional innovations aimed at strengthening the legislative power of the executive and the standing of the PM through a reorganization of the executive office in Palazzo Chigi. These reforms created the institutional structure which has remained in force ever since.¹¹ The relative continuity of institutional parameters allows the effects of alternation in government to be brought into sharper focus. The rest of this section is devoted to outlining how general patterns of executive agenda-setting have changed over the last 35 years. Adopting a macro perspective – an inevitable choice given space constraints – comes at the cost of a systematic test of the impact of factors such as the PM’s communicative style, the type of cabinet crisis or the impact of external events (e.g., economic crisis) on the content of PM speeches. This goes beyond the purview of the present analysis and we leave it to future research. The intention is rather to bring to light long-term trends in executive agenda-setting.

We expect the time at which the speeches are delivered, either at the beginning of the legislature or during the term, to matter for their attentional profile. First, the longer the time horizon is, the more ambitious the list of priorities should be. Second, the prestige of the electoral victory may still loom large during the so-called “honeymoon” period, thus PMs should normally be

⁹ For a more detailed account of this period, see Curini and Martelli (2009).

¹⁰ During the 1980s, some attempts were made to make the government function more cohesively, and to strengthen the role of the PM. For instance, Giovanni Spadolini established within the Presidency of the Council a department for the analysis and verification of the government programme, while Craxi tried to reinforce the steering role of the PM in a political rather than a diplomatic direction (see also Hine and Finocchi 1991).

¹¹ The only notable reform was passed through Law 50 of the 8 March 1999, passed under the aegis of the then Minister for the Public Function, Bassanini. It is credited for providing the first organic reorganization of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the structure of the Council of Ministers and the various Ministers’ offices.

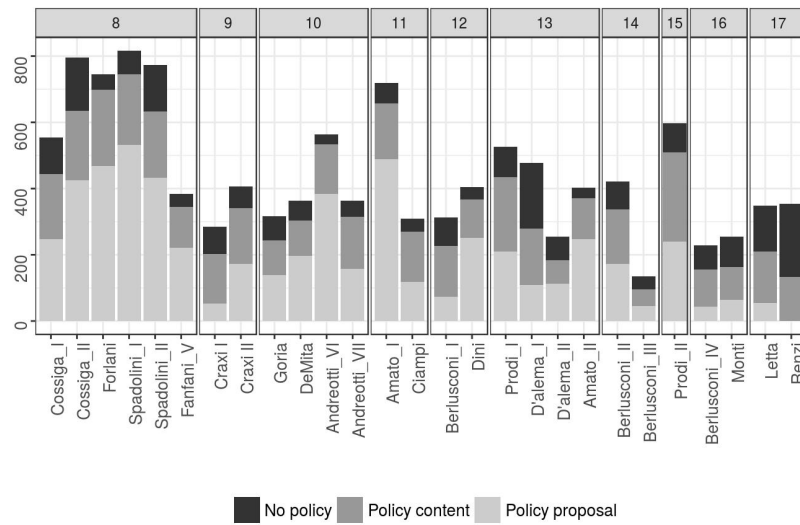
more ambitious in their policy declarations.

Figure 1 illustrates the change in the number of (quasi-) sentences in each speech, distinguishing between the share of rhetoric statements, generic and specific policy proposals. If one focuses on the total number of sentences, the pattern is rather erratic. The eighth legislature witnessed by far the longest speeches on average. Other long speeches are also those delivered by Andreotti VI (10th legislature), Amato I (11th) and Prodi II (15th). In contrast with the rest, these speeches also used a greater share of policy-related sentences. Although more research is warranted on this point, we may hypothesize that, given the extremely unruly and fragmented coalitions supporting these executives, such detailed agendas were seen as a useful tool to tie the hands of riotous coalition members.¹² The shortest speech preceded the investiture of the third Berlusconi government (14th legislature). The new cabinet emerged from a partial reshuffle of ministers orchestrated by Berlusconi to reflect changes in the internal balance of power of the majority coalition. With a relatively short time frame left before the end of the legislature, Berlusconi did not feel compelled to change the guidelines of his previous agenda. As a final note, Figure 1 shows a clear decreasing trend in specific policy proposals: they occupied around 60% of quasi-sentences during the 8th legislature, while this dropped to around 20% in the last two legislatures. The tendency is for speeches to become shorter and,

¹² In the case of Prodi and Amato, their more “technical” communication style might stem from their common professional background: they were both university professors (albeit with a rather long career in politics).

for the most part, they do not delve into policy details.

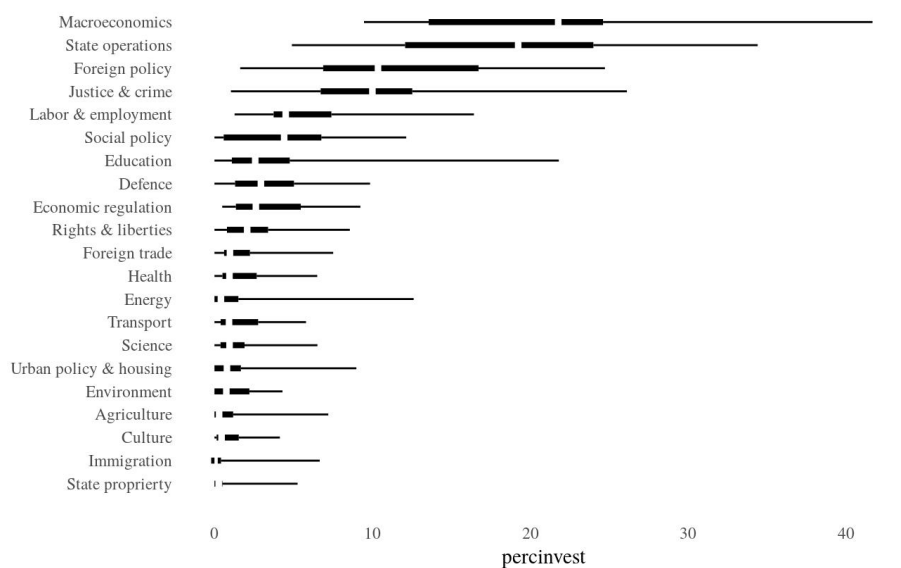
Fig. 1. *Distribution of quasi-sentences by type of content for the twenty-seven Italian governments*



Note: Number on top of the panels are legislative terms

Since the speeches vary in length, we analyse their issue composition as the share of sentences covering an issue, using the sum of general and specific policy proposals as the denominator. Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of attention share paid to each policy area in all speeches. To begin with, the proportion of attention paid to a single topic ranges from a minimum of 0% to a maximum of 40%. In line with previous studies (Jennings, Bevan, and John 2011a), we found that a group of core issues never leaves a cabinet's agenda: macroeconomics, justice and crime, foreign policy and state operations. These issues are strongly associated with the traditional functions of government and never leave the agenda. The agenda space for other issues, also referred to as "agenda diversity", is largely dependent on how much attention they capture (e.g., Jennings et al. 2011b). In particular, the share of references to macroeconomics and state operations stands out.

Fig. 2. *Distribution of attention across the twenty-one CAI policy issues*



Note: the thick line represents the interquartile range, the small white gap stands for the median and the long lines reach the minimum and maximum

Together, they always represent at least 2/5 of the total agenda. Attention to topics jumping on and off the agenda is distributed fairly equally. Within this second class of topics, the most citations were collected by labour and employment, social policy and defence, and the least by immigration and state property.

Two further measures are available to outline long-term variations in the policy composition of agendas: agenda scope and agenda diversity. The former measures the absolute number of policy issues which are granted at least one mention in a speech, irrespective of how much space each of them received. A PM's speech can be more or less selective. The inclusion of more issues implies committing the cabinet to act in a larger number of areas. The concept of agenda diversity is somewhat related but captures a different dimension of variation: the degree of fragmentation of the agenda. For instance, out of a number of issues that make it onto the agenda, a PM can focus most of their attention on a couple of topics (low diversity) or split their

time equally across all of them (high diversity). Studying policy agendas in terms of diversity is important for two reasons. On the one hand, given the finite nature of attention, it is problematic to account for the rise of an issue on the agenda without considering its interrelationship with the rest of the issues competing with it. On the other hand, variation in diversity is indicative of how a political system processes information and reacts to public signals. In other words, it reflects to some extent its interest representation system (Schattschneider 1960).

The measurement of agenda scope is straightforward: we count the number of major topics mentioned at least once in the speech. Thus, the score for each speech can vary between 0 and 21, the maximum number of topics in the codebook. Issue diversity is measured through the normalized Shannon's H entropy score (Boydston, Bevan, and Herschel 2014). This score varies between 0 and 1, and it increases as the spread of attention across all issues, using major topics, evens out.¹³ Assuming that there can be a maximum of 10 topics on the agenda, it will get: a 1 if each subject receives exactly 10% of the attention, or a 0 if the speech deals with just one topic. Figure 3 plots the variation of the two scores over time, with the dashed line indicating the mean value across the legislature. As anticipated, the patterns emerging from the two graphs look similar. If we look at the speeches of electoral governments (circles) and those of parliamentary governments (triangles) within the same legislature, we can notice an emerging pattern after the 11th legislature: speeches inaugurating the legislature tend to touch on a more heterogeneous range of topics and, excluding the 13th legislature, deal with them more evenly. These are interesting findings, which call upon the transition from a pivotal to a competitive party system. With regard to electoral programmatic speeches, it has been suggested that they tend to more closely reflect the priorities emphasized in the coalition programme, which has also become more articulated

¹³ It is calculated as follows:

$$\text{Shannon's } H \text{ normalised}$$

where x_i represents an issue, $p(x_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the issue receives, $\ln p(x_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the issue receives and N is the total number of issues.

(Borghetto and Carammia 2015). What is more, there is greater pressure on executives to deliver on their promises: now, the policy record and not just the ideological positioning are believed to matter for reelection (Capano and Giuliani 2001).

5

The relationship between ideological and agenda divergence

Our competing hypotheses on partisan influence posit that agenda divergence between the programmatic speeches of two governments should either increase in line with the ideological distance of their supporting coalitions (partisan differentiation) or that there should be no significant relationship between the two (partisan neutrality).

We measure agenda divergence, our dependent variable, by using the reverse of the “issue convergence score” developed by Sigelman and Buell (2004). For each pair of the 27 programmatic speeches ($n=351$), this index calculates the absolute differences in attention proportion for each of the 21 issues included.¹⁴ The index goes from 0, indicating a perfect overlap between the two agendas, to 1, when the distribution of attention diverges completely. For instance, a value of 0.8 means that 80% of the new agenda is different from that of the other executive.

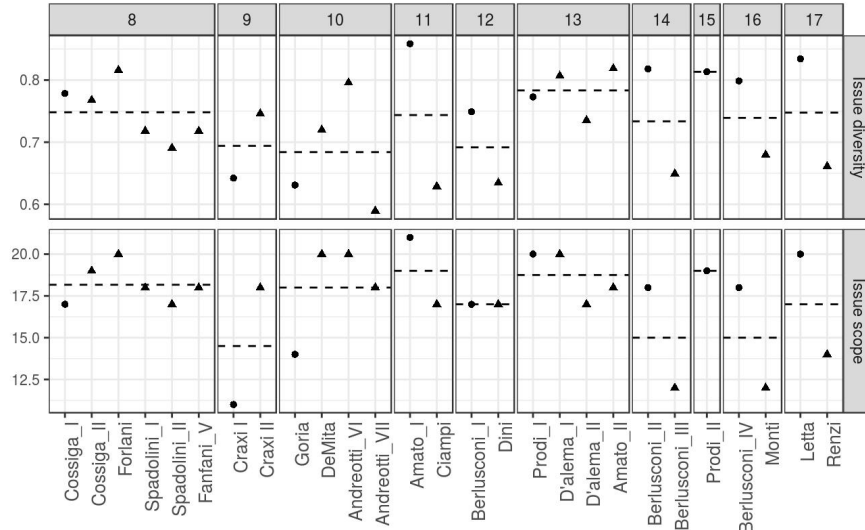
The average divergence score is 32.8 with a standard deviation of 8.2. As expected, the smallest divergence (14) emerges from the comparison of two agendas temporally near to one another: Craxi I (1983) and Goria (1987). On the other hand, the pair of Spadolini I (1981) and D'Alema II (1999) exhibits the highest divergence (56.1). Both were non-electoral cabinets, but they assigned opposite weight to foreign policy (Spadolini devoted a considerable share of his speech to Italy's relationship with the allies in the context of the Cold War) and government administration (D'Alema talked, among other things, about the reform of the electoral law and the federal reform of Italian institutions). The goal of our analysis is to test which

¹⁴ It is calculated as follows:

Sigelman /Buell Index

where n is the number of possible issue areas and x_i is the share of attention devoted to issue area i respectively at times t_0 and t_{-1} (for a similar approach, see Carammia et al. 2016).

factors account for this variability.



Note: Number on top of the panels are legislative terms. The possible range of issue diversity score goes from 0 to 1, for issue scope score from 1 to 21

Our main independent variable is the ideological divergence between governing coalitions on the Left–Right scale. Data on party positions, computed by Curini and Martelli (2009) and Curini (2011), use the speeches delivered by each party representative during the parliamentary debate immediately following the PM’s programmatic speech. Based on an analysis of the policy content of the speeches, these authors reconstruct the evolution of the Italian policy space in the First Republic and they show that it “fits studies of post-war Italian political history” (Curini 2011, 118). These estimates of policy positions serve our analysis needs perfectly because they allow the variation in party policy preferences to be tracked between elections, and not just across elections, as in the case of left–right party positions estimated through party manifesto data or expert surveys. Secondly, they allow us to control for the effect of contextual features, e.g., the saliency of specific issues at the time of the investiture debate.

We built our ideological divergence variable in two steps.

First, we computed the coalition's ideological position by averaging the positions of all governing partners. Two operationalizations are possible here, reflecting different understandings of agenda bargaining within a ruling coalition. First, following veto players theory (Tsebelis 2002), we may expect all partners to hold some veto power, regardless of their size. Small extreme parties grant their support in exchange for a voice in the coalition decision-making process. In this case, we aggregate party positions by taking their simple mean. The second possibility is that parties with a bigger representation in parliament have a stronger leverage in coalition bargaining (Strøm 1990). Should this be the prevalent dynamic, we weight the mean of party positions by their share of parliamentary seats. Secondly, for each pair of governing coalitions in our dataset, we computed the difference in their ideological positions using both their mean ideology (DISTANCE) and their mean weighted ideology (DISTANCEW). We took the absolute value of the difference, given that the expected net impact of an ideological difference of -10 should equal that of an ideological difference of 10.

Our model includes a set of control factors. GOVTYPE classifies all of the cabinets according to four types of government (minority governments, minimal winning coalitions, surplus majorities and technocratic) and assigns a value of 1 if both cabinets in the pair belong to the same category, or of 0 otherwise. We expect that, at the net of ideological differences, different types of government (reflecting a different equilibrium between the parties supporting the cabinet) employ different processes of agenda formation, which leads to a different fractionalization of the agenda. ENCP measures, for each pair of cabinets, the difference in the effective number of parties in the ruling coalition.¹⁵ Similarly to GOVTYPE, this variable captures different agenda-formation conditions: coalitions with more equally sized partners (a high ENCP) should display different methods of interest aggregation than coalitions with a dominant party (a low ENCP). Data on both GOVTYPE and ENCP were

¹⁵ This variable is defined as:

ENCP

where n is the number of coalition partners i and p_i is the square of each party's proportion of coalition seats.

retrieved from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2016). The last cabinet-related variable – POST-ELECTION – measures whether both governments in our pair are supported by either electoral coalitions – the first in the legislature – or parliamentary coalitions – any other coalition solution that has emerged in parliament during the legislature after the cabinet is voted down.

With regard to speech-specific variables, DIFF_LENGTH controls for the rhetoric style of PMs by calculating the number of (quasi-)sentences in each speech. As we show in Figure 1, some PMs have a greater tendency to delve into the details of policies than others. Finally, the variable DIFF_TIME controls for the temporal distance between governments. We compute it by ranking our 27 cabinets in time and by counting the number of observations separating the cabinets in our pair.¹⁶ This variable captures all of the factors (related to both the state of the economy and general political conditions) that varied over time.

Finally, to evaluate whether the advent of government alternation has imposed different dynamics on the effect of ideological distance on agenda divergence, we further added a binary variable (REPUBLIC), taking the value of 1 if both coalitions were in office during the Second Republic and 0 for coalitions ruling in the First Republic. All of the pairs (n=182) including coalitions from both periods were dropped.

¹⁶ For instance, the temporal distance between Prodi I (inaugurated in 1996, 53rd cabinet of the Italian Republic) and Berlusconi II (2001, 57th cabinet) is 4.

TABLE 1. *Ordinary Least Squares regression of factors driving divergence between government agendas (based on major topics).*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Dependent variable: DIVERGENCE					
(Intercept)	27.24* **	25.04* **	26.08* **	25.05* **	25.13* **
	(1.19)	(1.29)	(1.28)	(1.75)	(1.92)
GOVTYPE	0.10 (0.9)	0.42 (0.88)	0.25 (0.89)	1.67 (1.18)	2.21 (1.15)
ENCP	-0.36 (1.01)	-0.51 (1)	-0.35 (1.01)	-3.62* (1.74)	-4.11* (1.75)
POST-ELECTION	- 5.65** *	- 5.83** *	- 5.98** *	-3.60* (1.53)	-3.84* (1.54)
	(0.97)	(0.9)	(0.96)		
DIFF_TIME	2.94** *	2.86** *	2.69** *	1.26 (0.92)	1.42 (0.93)
	(0.54)	(0.52)	(0.53)		
DIFF_LENGTH	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)	0.00 (0)
DISTANCE		0.18** *		0.33** (0.12)	
		(0.06)			
DISTANCEW			0.13* (0.06)		0.42* (0.19)
REPUBLIC				6.44** (2.33)	6.47** (2.18)
DISTANCE*REPUB LIC				-0.35* (0.17)	
DISTANCEW*REP UBLIC					-0.42* (0.21)
Observations	300	300	300	146	146
R ²	0.162	0.199	0.176	0.145	0.147
Adjusted R ²	0.148	0.183	0.159	0.095	0.097
AIC	2075.0 3	2063.4 8	2072.0 1	973.48 4	973.13 7

Notes: * p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001.

Table 1 lists the results of our standard multiple linear regression models with heteroscedasticity-robust standard errors. We present five models: only including control variables (1); with the addition of our two main covariates measuring

government distance (2 and 3); and with the interaction between these two covariates and REPUBLIC (4 and 5).

The results in models 2 and 3 largely support the partisan differentiation hypothesis, positing that a government's ideological distance is correlated with the thematic divergence of the policy agendas of executives, regardless of how it is measured. The coefficients for DISTANCE and DISTANCEW are positive and statistically significant. For each additional change in government distance, divergence scores increase by an average of 0.18 (model 2) and 0.13 (model 3). *Ceteris paribus*, governments with different positions on the left-right dimension, are more likely (on average) to present different agendas. This finding supports previous scholarly works showing that being represented in government grants parties the opportunity to pull the ideological position of the government toward their ideal point (e.g., Laver and Budge 1992; Curini and Ceron 2013). Not only do the parties in government guide the policy preferences of the cabinet along the Left-Right dimension, but also its policy priorities.

As for our control variables, their both being electoral governments (POST-ELECTION) is always statistically associated with the degree of agenda convergence. The relationship is negative, meaning that, all else being equal, the agendas of electoral governments tend to converge. These results are in line with what emerged from our descriptive analysis of agenda evolution. The agendas of governments inaugurating a legislature tend to be distinct from all of the others. Cabinets feel entitled to build more ambitious and differentiated agendas because of the longer time horizon. Another consistently significant finding is the effect of DIFF_TIME. The further away in time governments are from one another, the more their agendas diverge. This finding is unsurprising but important, because it allows us to take into account both relatively short-term events (e.g., the Italian economic downturns in the early 90s and during the euro crisis affected the agenda of all of the cabinets in office during the period) and long-term transformations in economic and political contexts (e.g., it is not too far-fetched to expect that both the end of the Cold War and the deepening of European integration through subsequent Treaty modifications had an impact on cabinet priorities).

We fit the last two models (4 and 5) by considering only those pairs for which both cabinets belong to either the First or

the Second Republic. This way, we test whether the effect of government distance differs across the two periods. The interaction of both our main ideology-based covariates with REPUBLIC is significant at conventional levels with negative coefficients. The latter tell us that the effect of ideological distance in structuring the policy agenda of the PM's speech gets smaller during the Second Republic (REPUBLIC=1). We demonstrate this effect graphically in Figure 4. The line representing the predicted values of agenda divergence at different levels of DISTANCE is flat for Second Republic cabinets. For First Republic cabinets, it is positively rising.

We can only conjecture on the processes generating these results. First, it may arise from the transformation in the process of agenda formation across the two phases. Until the early 90s, programmatic platforms were drafted after an election or a government crisis with the primary purpose of holding together the coalition. As a result, they had to faithfully reflect the new political equilibrium among the coalition partners, even if ideological differences from one government to another were small. On the contrary, during the Second Republic, part of the burden of programmatic negotiation within a coalition shifted to the pre-electoral phase. Under these circumstances, the role played by confidence speeches became relatively less important in reflecting the priorities of coalition partners. Secondly, from a temporal perspective, our finding seems to lend support to the literature on the progressively fading distinction between left and right in contemporary democracies (see Mair 2013). As time goes by, exogenous determinants – like globalization and capital mobility in financial markets, the general pressure of an ageing population on welfare states and integration within the European Union – should have increasing weight in the drafting of executive agendas. On top of this, the parallel long-term decline in party-based social constituencies (Mair 2005) makes

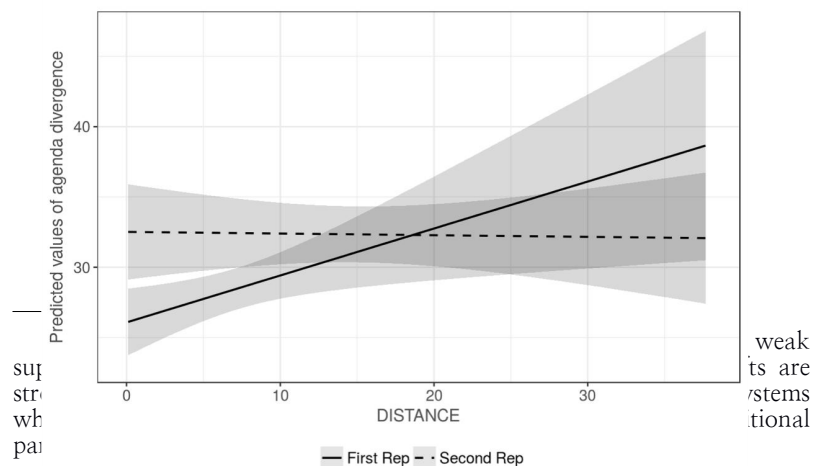
Fig. 4. Interaction effect of DISTANCE and REPUBLIC on AGENDA DIVERGENCE.

the incorporation of collective preferences in party policy orientations increasingly difficult.

6 Conclusions

Does a government's ideological position matter in terms of the kinds of policy decisions it makes? We analysed this central question in democratic theory from a different angle to what has been explored in previous scholarly research on executive agendas. More specifically, we tested whether partisan ideological differences between governments are correlated with the thematic divergence of their policy agendas. Whereas previous studies failed to find much effect of partisanship, our results demonstrate that ideologically distant cabinets tend to prioritize policy issues differently when constructing their agenda. These findings are interesting because they emerge from the analysis of a typically multiparty coalition-based political system where, due to the need for partners to compromise on policy, one would expect the relationship between ideology and agenda to be more difficult to observe than in a two party system.¹⁷

The interpretation of these findings comes with a caveat. Although we control for the time distance between cabinets, it is arguable that measuring ideological differences on the left-right



dimension is problematic when they are divided by decades. The finding that the effect of ideology differs between the First and Second Republic indicates that future research should look more closely into the issue of time comparison.

A second contribution made by this article was that it presented and explored a new dataset tracking the policy content contained in the investiture speeches of Italian PMs from 1979 to 2014. These data showed that PM investiture speeches have become progressively shorter and have devoted less space to specific policy proposals. At the same time, a limited number of issues have always remained at the core of programmatic speeches – macroeconomics, justice and crime, foreign policy and state operations – confirming comparative findings (Jennings et al. 2011).

As it adopted a macro-perspective, this article only started to scratch the surface of what is possible thanks to this new dataset. The adoption of the CAP coding scheme, which is also used to code the policy content of different policy documents in Italy (i.e., party manifestos, laws, legislative decrees and parliamentary questions) and several other countries, paves the road for several lines of research. For instance, cabinet agendas can be used either as a dependent variable – e.g., in studies investigating government coalition formation or PM leadership styles – or as an independent variable – e.g., when studying the distribution of attention in government legislative initiatives.

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